

“How It Lands”
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

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Reflections Part 1

How it lands. For those of us who carry a brand of privilege defined by race, gender identity, class, physical ability, or any of the ways in which we distinguish between “us” and “them,” how many times have we launched a statement that landed with a thud? If I was the perpetrator—and I have been—maybe what I said or did evoked a more subtle response, like a wince. Maybe I didn’t even notice the wince, because I wasn’t paying attention. As the person of privilege, I didn’t have to notice. Privilege carries that dubious luxury of not having to notice, not having to defer, and not having to pretend not to be hurt or demeaned.

If I did receive feedback from the person downwind of my jaded behavior, feedback that was impossible to ignore—like being told that what I said was really out of order or how could I be so clueless or, perhaps more commonly, a numb look followed by retreat to a safer space—what did I learn from it?

Did I say to the offended: “Oh, I feel so guilty!” Did I even tear up a bit? If so, I was making it all about me and MY feelings. Guilt has a way of doing that. Guilt is such a convenient trade-in for accountability.

OR did the feedback jar me, reaching a deeper level of awareness, so that I began to understand how my particular brand of privilege operates to unleash statements that are hurtful, patronizing, demeaning, and often downright cruel?

“How it lands” is a consequence of behavior that many of us began to explore in the first anti-racism workshop held in this congregation. We gathered this past June—most of us white, some of us of color obviously, and some of us of color not so obviously—to address the fault line that runs through this nation and just as surely through this congregation. Across the spectrum of genteel to brutal, racism is a fault line that has threatened since the days of the so-called discovery of this land by Columbus and company to fracture body and soul. And racism has made good on the threat. As people of faith who presume to be about wholeness of body and soul, it is our challenge to address it...from the inside out and the outside in. It is profoundly spiritual work, and it is not easy. Hurt comes before healing. Brokenness is; wholeness is the dream. Hard truths come before reconciliation can be even a glimmer on the horizon.

“But I don’t want to just talk or read or raise my awareness,” some of us say. “I want to DO something.” And what exactly do you want to do? What informs our actions? Yes, we talk about deeds over creeds; we say that actions speak louder than words. I just wonder if the state of our psyches and souls informs our actions and if our words are actions in themselves.

I don't know one person here who doesn't have good intentions. And I don't know one person here who believes in hell. Speaking for myself, I'm a gifted paver of roads, not necessarily the road to hell's opposite.

Recall the conversation with our youngsters. Once again, Dr. Seuss gets it! Maizie the mama bird, bored and stir-crazy from sitting on her egg, may have had good intentions as she told her friend Horton the elephant that she would be back soon after big-hearted Horton agreed to sit on her egg. But Maizie flew off to a sunnier clime, where she quickly let go of her phony-baloney promise to Horton. On the other hand, Horton was faithful.

“I meant what I said
And I said what I meant..
An elephant's faithful
One hundred per cent.”

Sometimes we do say what we mean, and sometimes it's thoughtful and sometimes it's just plain mean. And sometimes we say what we probably never meant in the first place. Good intentions and faithful follow-through, good intentions with no follow-through, good intentions with hurtful consequences, and yes, empty words with empty intentions from the get-go.

How it lands....what we say, what we say “sincerely,” what we do, what we do with all good intentions, and what we don't say and don't do. Our behavior and our non-behavior reap consequences for good and ill. When our words and actions land poorly, what is commonly felt is an “Ouch!” across the spectrum of pain.

The Anti-Racism team that is part of our Social Justice Council invited many of you to share your stories of “how it lands,” stories from your life experience that bring into this sanctuary the outcomes of our statements and actions often rendered with no intentions of being hurtful OR with no awareness that callous words and careless deeds can and do unleash hurtful and devastating consequences.

For those of you who shared your stories, we've agreed to honor your anonymity. So please don't assume that Angie Swanger and Nancy Burton are sharing THEIR stories. They're transmitting yours. It was courageous for you to share them at all. For those of us who can identify with the privilege conveyed in their telling, we might understand that before we can DO anything to redress the imbalance of power and the harsh outcomes of privilege, hearts must break and minds must open and souls must stretch. It's the only way I know to heal our brokenness.

Sources:

Theodor S. Geisel and Audrey S. Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hatches the Egg*, 1940.

Ouch Story – Memories of Kindergarten (edited and abridged)
(Offered by a member of the congregation)

There were many “Ouch” moments and situations in my life. We are part of an immigrant family. In grammar school, I was aware of the term, WASP, because my teachers at the time incorporated explanations of this term in lessons; usually in History class.

White Anglo Saxon Protestant [WASP] is NOT ME OR ANYONE IN MY IMMEDIATE FAMILY! I was shocked and thoroughly disappointed to learn in school that I was part of a group collectively known as the “other”. We were taught in the 60’s that WASPS had an integral part in coming to America on the Mayflower and establishing a Theocratic Society and settling the country, defining it’s boundaries, and growing it’s agrarian and industrial economy.

Here is what I retained from the early dialog of the “other”.

1. Light skin, straight blond, shiny hair, with perfect features, thin, well dressed and most importantly blue eyes. If I did not look like this I was an inferior human being.
2. Only WASPS get to go to college and not work in the factory doing piecework for an hourly wage.
3. Since the Civil War, everyone in America is free. Only some people are freer than others. Mainly, the WASPS and those who might be lucky enough to at least look like them. Shhh! Don’t tell them your parents speak a foreign language at home.
4. I have been auto didactic my whole life. I enjoy learning and exploring all the knowledge out there for the taking. So, imagine my surprise when I opened a National Geographic Magazine given to me, which was dated 1912, and saw an article on the travails of immigration to the USA, written by none other than that SCOTTISH WASP, Alexander Graham Bell.
5. Alexander G. Bell, bless his soul, informed the reader about the onslaught of the “colored races” of Southern Europe to our shores, mentioning the “Dark Southern Italian Race”.
6. Reading this clarified a lot of behaviors directed at me and members of my family.
7. I am an olive skinned human being. I have dark brown eyes, and used to have deep black, wavy hair. I was “pasta heavy” growing up and not able to fit into pretty dresses. I did not fit in with the WASPS. So here is what it was like for me beginning with my stepping up into the Kindergarten bus in my VERY WHITE town not so far from here.

That first day of school I carried the lunchbox Grandpa Nick bought me. It had butterflies and flowers on it. I had a very big carpenter’s pencil in my hand, which fit nicely into a zippered pouch in the shape of a pencil as well. I wore a brown dress that Uncle Billy bought me. My father, a barber, and always “scissor happy” among other things, had chopped off my hair so I had very short ugly bangs. I cried when he did it, begging him that I wanted long hair so I could make a ponytail.

I was so looking forward to meeting other little kids. I got on the bus and sat right up front. Smiling, I showed off my lunch box and pencil box. At school we were ushered into our classroom. It had cubicles with all sorts of toys and furniture, dolls, high chairs, tea services, and a fake grocery. A whole make-believe kitchen! Another area had huge wooden blocks and a painting easel. Books lined the walls. There was a piano too. I just loved it. The expectation of hours of playing and creating make believe lives with other kids my age was so exciting to me.

Even though I didn't know anyone, adult or child, in that classroom that first day of school, apparently the adults in that school and that community knew who I was and which family I was from in town. I was only five. More importantly, because my teacher, Mrs. Kramer, knew my family, I did not have a prayer of success in that room that first school year.

We had long tables to sit at, and the teacher instructed us to find a seat at a table to begin a day of lessons and learning. I went to sit down next to Beth and Marie. "Hey, you can't sit next to us!" Stupid me. I asked, "Why not??....." Because you're fat and you're ugly." At that point every time I went to sit down in another spot, another child would tell me, "NO, you can't sit next to me." So, my first discovery at age five was that meanness is contagious, and even someone who had no intention of being mean will be mean if they are pressured by a "ring leader."

I just stood there in that classroom, tears welling up in my dark brown eyes and very afraid. Another little girl, bless her, came to my rescue that day. I cannot remember her exact name; I just remember it was a sweet name, pretty name. It might have been GRACE.

So "Grace" said in a sweet little girl voice, "You can sit here next to me if you want." I turned toward the voice and realized I was staring at a little girl, who was next to me, the darkest colored kid in class that day. It was me, the olive skinned Italian, and Grace, the "Negro", both ostracized by teacher and students alike, who would be best buddies that year.

Together we were strong and lonely or afraid. We liked to play "house" but could only play "house" when the other kids left the area. If we tried to play with them they would say, "You can't come in here." We would ask, "Why not?" Their response? "Because you are both very dirty." Grace would tell them, "God loves Everybody," and we would hold hands and skip away to play with clay or blocks.

Because of this early experience, I would quiz my family on the differences between human beings. I could not wrap my brain around why, even though preachers preached love on the TV and all God's children are created equal, equality did not exist.

This happened in 1957. That whole year my grandmother talked to me about what it was like being Italian in a WASPY world. She was the person who introduced me to the activism of Rosa Parks. Grandma told me the story about the bus that Ms. Parks rode on. She told me that even though I heard the word "Nigger" used all the time, it was a bad word, and I should call dark skinned people Negroes. She also informed me that the words, "Diego, WOP, and Ginnie" were bad to use too. Before she told me that, I didn't know that Italians were second class citizens as well. My first ouch!

Grace, my first friend, a child of color in a very white world, did not show up for school one day and then the next, and I never saw her again. She had been in the family car with her four sibs and her mother. The car had stalled on the railroad tracks on Christian Lane, and they were all killed. I cried hard when I found out. I played alone on most days the rest of my time in Kindergarten.

Ouch Story – A Gay Church? *(Offered by a member of the congregation)*

While getting all the gay friendly trappings for the front of the church, someone asked: Are we now going to be known as “the gay church?” As a lesbian who found this church a safe haven, a place where I could truly be myself and talk about my wife and daughter with a sense of pride, knowing that I would not just be tolerated but celebrated, this question landed oddly on my ears.

I asked myself: Does the celebration/acceptance of who I am happen only within the walls of this church, not to be displayed outside? And would there be no room for pursuing social justice around LGBTQ issues? Once I moved from my own self interests, I wondered how other LGBTQ folks would find us if there were only a small purple sign on our hallway wall and maybe a mention on our website.

I remember how hard it was for me to find this place. Once I found it, I found the acceptance and celebration of my sexual orientation; but how would others struggling out there and needing this find it? Do gay people have to go to the “Christian centered” MCC church? (Metropolitan Community Church, which denominationally focuses on welcoming LGBTQ folks) And where do they go when “Christian” doesn’t quite fit for them?

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Reflections – Part 2

Who am I? Who are you? Am I the person gathering the gay-friendly décor for the front of our church? Am I the person wondering aloud if the UU Church in Meriden will now be known as “the gay church?” Am I the person wondering aloud and thinking that this was a funny question; or am I frightened that I, a straight person, might be associated with a fellow congregant, who is lesbian? Who am I? Who are you?

Am I the little girl eager to make friends in my kindergarten class, trusting that they would be as eager to be friends with me? Am I the little girl with beautiful olive skin and an ample frame and a family that nurtured me well but was not recognized in town as “a good family” and a home that was home sweet home but was not recognized in the village square as “a good home?” Am I the little girl who befriended the child so taunted by her classmates, the little girl just a few shades darker than my eager and lonely friend? Am I perhaps a little girl who joined in the taunts, who found it easier, even more fun, to deride these two little girls who seemed so different from “us?” Who am I? Who are you?

Am I the bystander? Am I the one who knows that something unkind is happening, that something quite cruel is happening, but it’s not up to me to say anything, to step in and call it the way I see it? Am I the person who does speak up, who dares to say, “Whoa! What’s going on here?” and risk landing downwind of the insensitive question, the cruel taunts? Who am I? Who are you?

As for the social construct of race and the social reality of racism and in the spirit of hope for those of us who are American non-blacks, I invite you to hear the seasoned wisdom of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, writing from her perspective as a Nigerian American. I read from Ms. Adichie’s recent novel/commentary, *Americanah*:

“Dear American Non-Black, if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life. Don’t say ‘It’s just like when I...’ You have suffered. Everyone in the world has suffered. But you have not suffered precisely because you are an American Black. Don’t be quick to find alternative explanations for what happened. Don’t say ‘Oh, it’s not really race, it’s class. Oh it’s not race, it’s gender. Oh, it’s not race, it’s the cookie monster.’” You see, American Blacks actually don’t WANT it to be race. They would rather not have racist **** happen. So maybe when they say something is about race, it’s maybe because it actually is? Don’t say ‘I’m color-blind,’ because if you are color-blind, then you need to see a doctor and it means that when a black man is shown on TV as a crime suspect in your neighborhood, all you see is a blurry purplish-grayish-creamish figure. Don’t say ‘We’re tired of talking about race’ or ‘The only race is the human race.’ American Blacks, too, are tired of talking about race. They wish they didn’t have to. But **** keeps happening.

....So after this listing of don'ts, what's the do? I'm not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it's not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is. If you don't understand, ask questions. If you're uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It's easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here's to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding."

Listening, asking, noticing, letting in, letting go. For those among us who are American non-Blacks, there is much that we can do. For those among us who are straight or economically well-off or recognized as upright in town, there is hope that we can "get it." And when we do, we will never be the same, we will never hear the same, we will never speak the same, and we will never act the same.

Amen

Sources:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, Toronto, 2013, 326-328.